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STATEMENT OF MARCIA STEPHENS BLOOM BERNICAT AMBASSADOR-DESIGNATE TO THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF BANGLADESH BEFORE THE SENATE FOREIGN RELATIONS COMMITTEE

JULY 17, 2014

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, I am honored to appear before you today. I would like to sincerely thank the President and the Secretary of State for the trust and confidence that they have placed in me as their nominee for Ambassador to the People's Republic of Bangladesh.

Mr. Chairman, I would like to introduce Kathryn Bloom White and Luther White, my sister and brother-in-law; and Thomas Darby, one of my dearest friends since Third Grade with whom my sister and I share a proud Jersey Shore upbringing. My sons Sumit Nicolaus and Sunil Christopher hail from the subcontinent and have enthusiastically called the world their classroom, as has their father, Olivier Bernicat. It has been my privilege to serve the American people in eight countries across five geographic regions over the past three decades.

It is an honor to be nominated to serve the United States in such a strategically important country, at such a critical time for our bilateral relationship. As the world's eighth-largest country by population and third-largest Muslim-majority nation, Bangladesh is known for its moderate, secular, pluralistic traditions. With an annual economic growth rate of roughly six percent each year, Bangladesh aspires to become a middle income country and is an increasingly important trading partner and destination for U.S. investment. It is strategically situated between a growing India and a newly opening Burma, and therefore is well-positioned to play a key role in linking South and Southeast Asia.

Labor rights and workplace safety in Bangladesh remain a top U.S. priority. We need Bangladeshis to ensure there will be no more heart-rending tragedies like the Rana Plaza building collapse or the Tazreen Fashions factory fire. With support from the United States and other international partners, Bangladesh has begun to make progress in transforming its garment sector. If confirmed, I pledge to you that I will actively further our efforts to strengthen respect for labor rights and to improve workplace safety in Bangladesh.

Bangladesh's growth extends beyond its economy, as the country is on pace to meet many key UN Millennium Development Goals. It has been a development success story over the past two and half decades and the United States has been proud to assist Bangladesh in achieving these

successes. Bangladesh is the largest recipient of U.S. foreign assistance in Asia outside of Afghanistan and Pakistan. It is a focus country for three of the President's key development efforts: Global Health, Global Climate Change, and Feed the Future. The United States has also worked closely with Bangladesh to combat trafficking in persons and mitigate the threat of natural disasters, to which Bangladesh, due to its geography, is particularly prone. I look forward to the opportunity, if confirmed, to continue to support these important partnership efforts. In addition, if confirmed I look forward to continuing to advance our cooperation on strengthening security, including on issues of counterterrorism, maritime security, peacekeeping and combatting trafficking of drugs and arms.

The strong U.S.-Bangladesh relationship allows us to discuss our differences, when they occur, in a spirit of candor and openness. In this context, we have noted the United States remains concerned about recent trends in democracy and human rights in Bangladesh. The Parliamentary elections of January 5 were undeniably flawed, and Bangladesh's main political parties urgently need to engage in constructive dialogue that leads to a more representative government. We remain gravely concerned about attacks on religious and ethnic minorities, political violence, and extrajudicial killings allegedly committed by security forces. If confirmed, I will work hard to support efforts to promote accountability and strengthen human rights and democracy in Bangladesh.

If confirmed, I will work with the government, civil society and Bangladeshis of all walks of life to ensure an environment that encourages the broadest and fairest participation. I will, if confirmed, passionately advocate policies that enshrine peaceful democratic values, including respect for human rights and diversity, room for civil society to flourish, space for the free and peaceful discussion of political differences unmarred by violence, and adherence to the rule of law by an independent judiciary. The United States supports bringing to justice those who committed atrocities in the 1971 war, but those trials should be fair and transparent, and in accordance with international standards. We will also continue to support the right of impressive Bangladeshi civil society organizations to operate independently and to express their views openly, recognizing that such institutions play an important role in any flourishing democracy. We also encourage the government to ensure the continued effectiveness of Grameen Bank and protect its unique governance structure.

The most serious responsibility of any Chief of Mission is to ensure the safety and security of our staff abroad. Throughout the tense lead-up to and aftermath of the elections this past January, our Embassy in Dhaka worked closely with law enforcement and security counterparts to ensure protection of personnel and facilities, which will remain a top priority if confirmed.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for your strong interest in South Asia and the positive role the United States can play as our government rebalances to that continent. If confirmed, I welcome the opportunity to work with you, your Committee and other members of Congress to advance America's interests in Bangladesh and throughout the region. It would be a great privilege to represent the people of the United States of America.

I would be honored to answer your questions.